Jacob Riis

Emigrating to the [United States](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/616563/United-States) at the age of 21, Riis held various jobs, gaining a firsthand acquaintance with the ragged underside of city life. In 1873 he became a police reporter, assigned to New York City’s Lower East Side, where he found that in some tenements the infant death rate was one in 10. Riis employed the newly invented flashbulb technique in photographing the rooms and hallways of these buildings in order to dramatize his lectures and books.

How the Other Half Lives made Riis famous. The response of the future U.S. president [Theodore Roosevelt](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/509347/Theodore-Roosevelt) was: “I have read your book, and I have come to help.” The book stimulated the first significant New York legislation to curb [tenement](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/587209/tenement) house evils. The illustrations were largely line drawings based on Riis’s photographs. A reprint in 1971 included 30 photographs on which the original illustrations were based and 70 related Riis photographs.

Of Riis’s many other books, the most noteworthy was his autobiography, The Making of an American(1901).

**A Slum Tour**

"Riis organized his most famous book, which was a best-seller and launched his career as a reformer — How the Other Half Lives — as a kind of a slum tour, going neighborhood by neighborhood, describing ethnic group by ethnic group," Yochelson says. "That was a pre-established literary genre, which he was borrowing. It had a lot of entertainment value. 'Come see the colorful Italians and the mystifying Chinese.'

"And there was the sense of he was playing on the ... entertainment value of these stereotypes," she says. "So on the one hand, there was a certain racial typology that he believed in. But it was also popular culture, and he abandoned that after How the Other Half Liv

"I do think that Riis is the first muckraker," Czitrom says. "I think he represents the beginning of a sort of progressive sensibility ... Riis believed that it was important, that it was crucial, to try to rouse the conscience of the public, to appeal to the conscience. This belief that if we could simply expose conditions, if people simply knew how bad things were, they would rise up and change them."